RUN, MELOS!

BY OSAMU DAZAI

Melos was enraged. He resolved to do whatever he must to rid the land of that evil and ruthless king. Melos knew nothing of politics. He was a mere shepherd from an outlying village who spent his days playing his flute and watching over his sheep. But Melos was a man who felt the sting of injustice more deeply than most.

Before dawn this very day, Melos had left his village to travel some ten leagues, over plains and mountains, to the city of Syracuse. Melos had no mother or father, nor a wife of his own. He lived with his younger sister, a shy girl of sixteen who was soon to be wed to a certain true and honest herdsman. It was to purchase his sister's wedding dress and food and drink for the wedding feast that Melos had undertaken the long journey to the city. He had made his purchases and was now strolling down one of the main streets of the capital, on his way to visit his friend Selinuntius, a close comrade since childhood. Selinuntius was living in Syracuse, where he worked as a stonemason. Some time had passed since they had last met, and Melos was looking forward to the visit. As he walked along, however, he began to notice something odd about the atmosphere of the city. It was strangely hushed and quiet. The sun had already set, and the streets, quite naturally, were dark, but the mournful mood that hung over the city was somehow more than the mere advent of night could account for. Melos was by nature easygoing and carefree, but now he began to feel apprehensive. Stopping a young man on the street, he asked if some misfortune had

befallen the city, adding that on his previous visit, some two years before, the streets even at night had been filled with people laughing and singing and bustling cheerfully about. The young stranger only shook his head and hurried on. A bit farther along, Melos met an elderly man and asked the same question, this time with greater urgency. The old man said nothing. Only when Melos took him by the shoulders and shook him, repeating the question, did he finally reply, whispering as if fearful of being overheard.

“The king is putting people to death.”

“For what reason?”

“He says they are full of evil intent. Of course, it isn’t true.”

“Has he killed many?”

“Yes. The first was his sister’s husband. Next was the prince, his own son and heir. Then his sister and her child. Then his wife, the queen. Then his vassal, the wise Alekis …”

“Shocking. Has he gone mad?”

“No, he is not mad, but he says that no one is to be trusted. Recently he has grown suspicious of his retainers, and has commanded the more affluent of them to yield up to him one hostage. The punishment for refusal is death by crucifixion. Six have been executed today.”

Hearing this, Melos was enraged. “What sort of king is this?” he cried. “He must not be allowed to live!”

Melos was a simple man. With his purchases still slung over his shoulder, he made his way to the castle and stole inside. He was

soon caught by the guards, however, who bound him hand and foot. The uproar only increased when, as Melos was being searched, a dagger was found in his pocket. He was dragged before the king.

“What would you with this dagger of yours?” the tyrant Dionysius demanded with quiet majesty. “Speak!”

“I would deliver the city from the hands of a tyrant,” Melos fearlessly replied.

“You?” The king smiled condescendingly. “Pitiful little man. What do you know of my pain and solitude?”

“Stop!” Melos shot back, flushed with anger. “To doubt the hearts of men is the greatest, most shameful of evils. And you, my king, doubt the loyalty of your subjects.”

“Do you not prove my suspicion warranted? Men are not to be trusted. What are men but lumps of selfishness and greed? To take them at their word is to invite ruin.” The king spoke these words softly, with composure, and now he sighed. “Do you not think that I myself desire peace?”

“Peace? And for what end? To protect your throne?” Now it was Melos who smiled, with scorn. “What peace is there in the murder of innocent people?”

“Silence, peasant.” The king raised his head. “Such fine words slip easily from your lips. But I, unfortunately for you, am one whose gaze penetrates the hearts of men. Soon you, too, when nailed to the cross, will weep and wail and beg for mercy. Expect none from me.”

“Ah, such a wise king. Small wonder you bear such a great love for

yourself. As for me, I am prepared for death. I'll not beg for my life. But…" Melos hesitated, casting his eyes downward. "But if you would grant me one request, I ask that you delay the execution for three days. I wish to see my only sister wed. Grant me three days to go back to the my village and attend the wedding festivities. I shall, without fail, return here before the third day is ended."

"Fool." A dry, raspy chuckle escaped the tyrant's lips. "Such preposterous lies. Does a wild bird, once released, return to its cage?"

"I *will* return," Melos insisted, his voice desperate with emotion. "I am a man of my word. Three days is all I ask. My sister awaits me even now. But since you so distrust me, very well, then … There lives in this city a stonemason named Selinuntius. He is to me a peerless friend. I shall leave him here as hostage. If I should flee, if by sundown of the third day I have not returned, then you may hang him on the cross in my stead."

The king mused, and smiled with cruel cunning. The impudence of this peasant. Of course he would not return. Perhaps, however, it would be amusing to pretend to be deceived and to set him free. Nor would it be a disagreeable task, on the third day, to have the other executed in his place. To watch the hostage's crucifixion with a sorrowful countenance, as if to say: Behold him – proof that men cannot be trusted. Would it not be a proper lesson for the so-called honest men of the world?

"So bet it. Let the hostage be sent for. You are to return before sundown of the third day. Should you be late, the hostage shall die. Yes, you would do well to come a bit late: you will be absolved

forever of your crime.”

“What! What are you saying?”

“Ha, ha! Be late, if you value your life. I know your heart.”

Melos could only stamp his foot in vexation. He had no more use for words.

Late that night, Selinuntius was brought to the castle. There, in the presence of the tyrant Dionysius, t two bosom friends greeted each other for the first time in two years. Melos explained everything. Selinuntius nodded silently and embraced him. For the two true friends, that was enough. Selinuntius was bound with ropes. Melos, free, set out at once. The early summer sky was brimming with stars.

All night Melos ran, racing the ten leagues back to his village without stopping to sleep. He arrived on the morning of the following day. The sun was already high, and the villagers had begun their day’s work in the fields. Melos’s younger sister was watching the sheep in his absence. She was startled and full of concern when she saw him staggering toward her, exhausted, and she deluged him with questions.

“It’s nothing.” Melos forced a smile. “I’ve left some unfinished business in the city. I must return there soon. We shall hold the wedding feast tomorrow. I trust you’ll have no objection to hurrying things along?”

A blush colored his sister’s cheeks.

“Are you glad? I brought a beautiful dress for you to wear. Now go and spread the word among the villagers. The wedding will be

tomorrow.”

So saying, Melos staggered off toward his house. Once there, he prepared the altar and arranged tables and chairs for the feast. No sooner was this done than he collapsed to the floor and fell into a sleep as deep as death.

It was night when Melos awoke. He leaped to his feet and rushed off to the house of the groom. He found him at home and explained that circumstances had arisen that forced him to request that the wedding be held the following day. The young herdsman was surprised and protested that it was too soon, that he had not made any arrangements, and asked Melos to wait until the grapes were harvested. Melos insisted that no delay was possible, that it must be tomorrow. The groom, too, was adamant in his refusal. They argued and pleaded with each other until dawn, when, after much coaxing, Melos finally persuaded the young man to agree.

The marriage rites were performed at noon. Just as the bride and groom were concluding their oaths to the gods, the sky grew dark with clouds. Scattered raindrops fell, and these soon gave way to a torrential downpour. The guests thought this an unfortunate omen, but they shrugged it off and made themselves be of good cheer. Soon, in spite of the sultry, oppressive heat inside the little house, they were all merrily singing and clapping their hands. Melos, too, was beaming with pleasure, and was even able to forget, for the moment, his promise to the king. The revelry only increased once night had fallen, and now the guests were all but oblivious to the downpour outside. Ah, to live forever this way, among these good people, thought Melos. But he knew it was not to be. His life was no

longer his own, and he steeled himself in his resolve to return to Syracuse. But there was time enough before sundown of the following day. He would leave as soon as he'd had a short sleep. The rain, too, may have eased by then, he thought. Even men such as Melos are reluctant to part with those they love, and each extra moment spent relaxing in his own home was precious to him. He drew near the bride, who throughout the feast had been sitting in a daze, as if intoxicated with joy.

After congratulating her, Melos said, "I'm very tired, and, with your leave, I'll be off to sleep. As soon as I awake, I must depart for the city. I have vital business there. You now have a gentle, understanding husband to care for you. Even when I am gone, you will not be alone. What your brother despises most in this world is distrust of others, and deceit. You know that, don't you? You and your husband must keep no secrets from each other. That's all I want to say to you. Your brother is, perhaps, a man of worth. Be proud of him."

The bride only nodded dreamily. Melos then turned to the groom, clapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Neither of us had time to make the proper arrangements. The only treasures I have are my sister and my flock of sheep. They are yours. I ask only this in return – that you always take pride in having become the brother of Melos."

The groom, not knowing how to respond, fidgeted shyly with his hands. Melos smiled and, bowing slightly to bid the company farewell, left the banquet. He went to the sheep pen outside, where he fell into a deathlike sleep.

He awoke the next day at dawn. Great gods! – he thought, leaping to his feet – have I overslept? No, it is early yet. If I leave now I'll arrive with time to spare. Today, at all costs, I must show the king that men can, and will, be true to their word. Then I shall climb upon the cross with a smile.

Calmly, deliberately, Melos began to prepare for his journey. The rain appeared to have let up somewhat, and no sooner had he finished his preparations than he braced himself, dashed outside, and began to run with all the swiftness of an arrow in flight.

This evening I will be killed. I run to meet my own death. I run to save my friend, who waits in my stead. I run to deal a blow to the wicked heart of the king. I have no choice but to run. And I will be killed. Youth, honor is thine to preserve!

It was not easy for Melos. Several times he nearly came to a halt, and had to reproach himself loudly as he ran. He left the village behind, crossed a stretch of plain, and made his way through a forest. By the time he reached the next village, the rain had stopped, the sun was high, and the day grew hot. Melos wiped the sweat from his forehead with his fist. Now that he'd got this far, he was no longer pretty to distracting thoughts of home and village.

My sister and her husband will be happy together. There is nothing now to weigh upon my mind. I need only run straight for the castle of the king. Nor need I hurry so, at that. I can walk at a leisurely pace and still be in time.

Melos slowed to a stroll and began to sing, in a beautiful voice, a little song he loved. He walked two leagues, three leagues, at an easy

gait. But when he was nearly halfway to the city, an unforeseeable disaster brought him to a halt. Look there! The heavy rains of the day before had caused the mountain springs to overflow, the brooks and streams to swell, their dark, turbid waters to rush down the slopes and fill the riverbed, where, with one powerful, roaring surge, they had swept away the bridge, smashing its beams to pieces. Melos stood and stared in stunned disbelief. He looked up and down the riverbank and called out at the top of his lungs; but there was not a boat nor a ferryman in sight. The river was still rising, tossing about like a restless sea. Melos collapsed on the bank, weeping, and raised his arms in an appeal to his god.

"Stay, O Zeus, this raging current! Already the sun is at its zenith. If, by the time it sinks from sight, I have not reached the castle gate, my faithful friend must die for me!"

As if scornful of Melos's cries, the dark waters swelled and raged with even greater violence. Waves swallowed wave, swirling and crashing, and Melos could only watch as the moments fled. At last his despair turned to daring. He had no choice but to try to swim across.

"Gods! I call you to witness the power of love and truth that will not bow to these fierce waters!"

Melos dived into the current and began his desperate struggle with the tumultuous waves that lashed and squirmed about him like countless giant serpents. With all the strength he could summon, he cleaved his way through the surging, whirling rapids like a ferocious lion in battle. And perhaps the gods, on seeing this heroic display, were moved to compassion. Even as Melos was tossed and swept

along by the wild current, he somehow managed to reach the opposite bank and cling to the trunk of a tree there. He climbed ashore, shook the water from his body with a mighty shudder, and hurried on. There was not a moment to lose. The sun was already inclining toward the west. His breathing heavy and labored, he ran up the mountain toward the pass. Only when he reached the top did he pause to catch his breath, and it was then that, out of nowhere, a band of mountain brigands appeared on the path before him.

“Halt.”

“What is this? I must be at the castle of the king before sundown. Let me go.”

“Not till we have your valuables, we won’t.”

“I have nothing. Nothing but my life. And today I must offer that up to the king.”

“It’s that life of yours we’ll have, then.”

“Wait. Can it be that the king sent you to stop me?”

The brigands made no reply but lifted their clubs in the air. Melos dropped nimbly into a crouch, pounced upon the man nearest him, and quickly wrestled his club away.

“I would not harm you but for the righteousness of my cause!” Melos shouted, and with three furious, savage strokes of the club, three brigands lay dead. As the others recoiled in fear, Melos broke away and sprinted down the mountain path.

He reached the foot of the mountain in a single dash, but then exhaustion began to take its toll. The afternoon sun was now shining

full in his face with its fierce, blazing heat. Waves of dizziness swept over him, and again and again he fought the feeling off until, staggering a final two or three steps, his knees gave out and he fell to the ground. He could not get up. He lay on his back, weeping bitterly.

Ah, Melos, you've made it this far. You've swum the raging river, laid three bandits low, and run like Hermes himself. Brae and true Melos, how shameful to lie here now, too exhausted to move. Soon your beloved friend will pay with his life for his trust in you. O unfaithful one, are you not just as the king suspected?

Thus Melos ranted at himself, but all his strength was gone. He lay sprawled out in a green field beside the road, and could make no more progress than a worm that crawls. When the body is fatigued, the spirit, too, grows weak. Nothing matters now, he told himself, as a sulky petulance, so unbecoming a hero, found its way into his heart.

I've done my best. I had not the slightest intention of breaking my promise. As the gods are my witness, I taxed my powers to the utmost. I am not an unfaithful man. Ah, could I but cut open this breast that you might see the crimson of my heart, whose very lifeblood is love and truth. But my strength has left me, my spirit is exhausted. Cursed be my fate! My name will be an object of ridicule. If I am to collapse here now, it will be as though I'd done nothing in the first place. I deceived my friend. Nothing matters now. Was this to be my destiny, then? Forgive me, Selinuntius. You were constant in your trust in me. Nor have I deceived you. You and I were good, true friends. Never did either of us harbor in his breast the dark

clouds of doubt. Even now, you patiently await my return. Ah, I know you are waiting. Thank you, Selinuntius. You trusted me, and trust between friends is life's greatest treasure. I cannot bear to think of it. I ran, Selinuntius. I had not the slightest intention of deceiving you. Please believe me! I overcame the raging river. I escaped the brigands who surrounded me, and ran to the foot of the mountain without a moment's rest. Who but I could have made it this far?

Ah, but expect no more of me now. Forget about me. Nothing matters any more. I am defeated. A disgrace. Laugh at me. The king whispered that I'd do well to arrive late. If I did so, he would kill the hostage, he said, and spare my life. I despised him for that. But now look at me: am I not doing exactly as he suggested? I will arrive late. The king will take it for granted that I did so intentionally. He will laugh at me and send me on my way, a free man. That, for me, is a fate worse than death. I will be branded a traitor forever, the greatest ignominy known to man. No, Selinuntius, I too shall die. You and you alone will believe my heart was true. Let me die with you.

But have I the right? Should I not live on, in corruption and wickedness? I have my home in the village. I have my sheep. Surely my sister and her husband would not drive me from my home. Righteousness, trust, love – are they not merely words? We kill others that we may live. That is the way of the world. And how futile it all is. I am a vile, deceitful traitor. Whatever I do is of no importance. Alas!

As Melos lay with arms and legs flung out on the ground, sleep began to overcome him. But then, suddenly, a murmuring sound reached his ears. Raising his head slightly, he held his breath and

listened. The sound came from somewhere nearby. Rising falteringly to his hands and knees, he saw it – water gurgling quietly out of a crevice in the rocks. The stream seemed to whisper to Melos, to beckon to him, and he bent over it and drank, scooping up the water with both hands. He let out a long, deep sigh, and felt as if he were awakening from a dream. He could go on. He would go on. As his body began to revive, a small spark of hope was kindled in his heart. The hope that he could preserve his honor by dying at the executioner's hands. The red, declining sun shone so brightly that it seemed to set the leaves and branches of the trees afire.

There is still time before sunset. Someone waits for me. Patiently, never doubting me, he waits for my return. I have his trust. My life? It counts for nothing. But this is not time to seek forgiveness with my own death. I must prove worthy of this trust. That, for now, is everything. Run, Melos!

He trusts me. He trusts me. That whispering of demons a moment ago was just a dream. A bad dream. Banish it from your mind. Men will have such dreams when the flesh is weary. There is no shame in that, Melos. You are a man of true valor. Have you not risen, are you not running again? Praise the gods. I can die the death of a righteous man. Ah, the sun sinks. How rapidly it sinks! Wait, O Zeus. I have been an honest man in life. Allow me to be as honest in death.

Pushing aside the people who crowded the road, sending some of them flying, Melos ran like a dark wind. He startled a crowd of revelers gathered for a feast in the grassy meadow by dashing recklessly through their midst. Kicking dogs out of his way and leaping over streams, he ran ten times as fast as the sinking sun. It

was as he passed a group of travelers walking the opposite way that he chanced to hear these ominous words: “That man will be on the cross by now.”

“That man.” It is for that man that I run. That man must not die. Faster, Melos. You must not be late. Now is the time to prove the power of love and truth.

Stripping himself nearly naked – for appearances meant nothing to him now – Melos ran on. He was barely able to breathe, and twice or three times he coughed up blood. But look. There, small in the distance, the towers of Syracuse. The towers, shining in the setting sun.

“Ah, it’s Melos, is it not?” A voice like a groan reached his ears along with the sound of the wind.

“Who speaks?” said Melos, without breaking stride.

“My name is Philostratus, sir, apprentice to your friend Selinuntius.” The young man ran behind Melos, shouting his words. “You’re too late, sir. It’s hopeless. You needn’t run now. You can no longer help him.”

“The sun has yet to set.”

“Even now he is being prepared for execution. You’re too late, sir. Alas. If only you had come but moments sooner!”

“The sun has yet to set.” Melos felt as if his heart would burst. His eyes were fixed on the huge, red sun on the western horizon. There was nothing to do but run.

“Enough, sir. Stay, I beg you. It is your life that is important now.

My master believed in you. Even when they dragged him onto the execution ground, he remained unconcerned. And when the king mocked and taunted him, all he said was, ‘Melos will come.’ His faith in you was unshaken to the end.”

“That is why I must run. I run because of that faith, that trust. Whether I make it in time is not the question. Nor is it merely a question of one man’s life. I am running because of something immeasurably greater and more fearsome than death. Run with me, Philostratus!”

“Ah, is it madness that drives you, then? Very well, sir, run! Run for all you are worth. Perhaps, just perhaps, there may still be time. Run!”

Nor could anything have made him stop. The sun had yet to set. Summoning up his last desperate reserves of strength, Melos ran on. Not a single thought passed through his head. He ran, propelled by some immense, unnamable force. The sun, meanwhile, sank lazily below the horizon, and just as the last, lingering ray of light was about to vanish, Melos, riding the wings of the wind, burst onto the execution ground. He’d made it.

“Hold, executioner. Spare that man. Melos has returned, as promised.” From the back of the great throng that had gathered, Melos tried to shout these words. All that issued from his parched, constricted throat, however, was a harsh whisper, and no one in the multitude took heed of his arrival. The cross was already in place, looming high above the crowd, and Selinuntius, bound with ropes, was being hoisted slowly upon it. Melos, with one final, courageous burst of strength, pushed his way through the crowd, much as he’d

earlier parted the turbulent waves of the river.

“Executioner! It is I! I am the one to be put to death. I am Melos. Melos, who left this man as surety, is standing before you!” Struggling to make his hoarse voice heard, Melos climbed upon the platform that supported the cross and flung his arms around the legs of his friend.

A stir ran through the crowd. From all sides rose cries of “Praise be!” and “Free him!” Selinuntius was lowered to the platform and released from his bonds.

“Selinuntius,” said Melos, his eyes brimming with tears. “Hit me. Strike me as hard as you can. For one moment, on my way here, a bad dream overcame me. If you won’t strike me, I haven’t the right to embrace you. Hit me, Selinuntius!”

Selinuntius seemed to understand. He nodded, and dealt Melos’s right cheek such a blow that the sound of it echoed over the execution ground. Then he smiled gently.

“Melos,” he said. “Hit *me*. Strike me as hard and as resoundingly as I’ve just struck you. Once during the past three days, I doubted you. Just once, but for the first time in my life. If you won’t strike me, I cannot embrace you.”

Melos’s hand flew through the air and crashed against Selinuntius’s cheek.

“Thank you, my friend!” Melos and Selinuntius spoke the words as one, embraced tightly, and sobbed aloud with joy.

From the crowd, too, came sobs. The tyrant Dionysius, perched on

his seat behind the crowd, stared intently at the two friends for some time. Then he walked quietly to where they stood. His face flushed as he spoke.

“Your wish has been fulfilled. You have subdued my heart. Trust between men is not just an empty illusion. I, too, would be your friend. Say you will let the league of love be three.”

Cheers and shouts of “Long live the king!” arose from the crowd. And out of the cheering throng, a young maiden stepped forward bearing a red cloak. When she held the cloak out to Melos, he could only look at it in bewilderment. His friend, true Selinuntius, was quick to explain.

“Look at you, Melos – your clothes are gone. Put on the cloak. This pretty maiden can’t bear to have everyone see you that way.”

A scarlet blush mantled the hero’s cheek.

(from an ancient legend, and a poem by Schiller)